



Book Reviews

Thematic Review: Gender Politics after War: Mobilizing Opportunity in Post-Conflict Africa

Gender, Violence and Politics in the Democratic Republic of Congo. By Jane Freedman. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2015. 163 pp. \$109.95 (hardcover).

Mobilizing Transnational Gender Politics in Post-Genocide Rwanda. By Rirhandu Mageza-Barthel. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2015. 187 pp. \$109.95 (hardcover).

Women and Power in Post-Conflict Africa. By Aili Mari Tripp. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 320 pp. \$29.48 (paperback).

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EMPOWERMENT AND OPPORTUNITY IN THE AFTERMATH OF CONFLICT

In recent decades, the devastating and disproportionate toll that armed conflict wreaks on the lives of women has garnered considerable and much-needed attention. Less studied, however, are the openings and opportunities brought about through war, which have the potential to disrupt and fundamentally reorder gender relations in the aftermath of conflict. These processes, neglected until recently in scholarship on

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postconflict transition, can — and have — resulted in surprisingly positive outcomes for women's rights and political representation.

Not long after Rwanda's genocide in 1994, for instance, the country boasted the highest percentage of women members of parliament (MPs) in the world. Liberia and Uganda, two other sites of extreme mass violence, demonstrated similarly impressive gains for women in the postconflict era, with Liberia inaugurating the continent's first popularly elected female president. Countries such as Botswana, on the other hand, which has an impressive record on a range of other development indicators and no recent experience with violent conflict, exhibit strikingly low rates of women's representation in parliament. Why are women's rights and rates of leadership improving rapidly in postconflict countries in Africa but lagging behind elsewhere on the continent? Put differently, what explains the puzzling disparity between the status of women in postconflict countries and in countries that have not experienced violent upheaval?

Three important new books on gender and power in postconflict Africa bring these questions to light. *Gender, Violence and Politics in the Democratic Republic of Congo* by Jane Freedman; *Mobilizing Transnational Gender Politics in Post-Genocide Rwanda* by Rirhandu Mageza-Barthel; and *Women and Power in Post-Conflict Africa* by Aili Mari Tripp illuminate the distinct ways in which women's roles can shift as a result of conflict. Tripp's book offers the most direct intervention on this theme, with her claims spanning the African subcontinent and drawing from data in three core cases — Angola, Liberia, and Uganda — in addition to fieldwork in several others countries. Tripp shows that gains in women's political representation have been greatest in countries that have experienced the most devastating violent upheavals, both in duration and scale.

These three books join a burgeoning new field of research positing that war — rather than merely serving as a force for destruction (or, perhaps, precisely because it is a force for destruction) — can give rise to rapid and often fairly progressive periods of social change. Because it causes widespread destruction, mass violence can disrupt preexisting social hierarchies and reconfigure gendered power relations (see recent work by Anderson 2016; Berry 2015a, n.d.; Hughes and Tripp 2015; Moran 2010; Viterna 2013; Wood 2008). Demographic, social, and economic shifts in times of war can lead to changes in labor force participation and open spaces for women's increased engagement in formal and informal political and economic spheres. At a more macrolevel, war also causes

institutional disjunctures, which can allow space for international norms and legal frameworks to take root domestically as constitutions are rewritten and institutions are rebuilt.

By focusing on these dynamics, this emerging body of scholarship offers a much-needed corrective to earlier work on women in war. Following the wars in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the mid-1990s, popular attention to the plight of women in war increased. Social science literature made important strides in calling attention to the disproportionate ways in which women have been affected by conflict, as well as the unique forms of suffering, shame, and victimhood many women have endured as a result of war. Much of this work has focused heavily on the targeting of women through sexualized violence (e.g., MacKinnon 1994). Some have foregrounded increased domestic burdens on women as male family members are fighting, in prison, or dead, and others have highlighted higher risks faced by women after being displaced from their homes. While more recent research has directed necessary attention to the fact that women's bodies often constitute the battlefields on which wars of national aggression are fought, this earlier literature typically maintained an almost exclusive focus on female harm and victimhood. In doing so, it risked obscuring female agency, disregarding the many and varied roles women have occupied during and after conflict, and overlooking opportunities for empowerment — in addition to marginalization — that can be born out of the devastation of war.

Gendered Change and Political Mobilization after Conflict

Increasingly, scholars have begun to problematize the fairly one-dimensional narrative concerning women and conflict that characterized early work on the topic. Recent scholarship highlights the agency and empowerment of female actors in a variety of different conflict roles. Pushing back against the idea of women as only victims, for instance, many have examined female combatants and wartime sexual violence perpetrated by women, challenging depictions of women as inherently less violent than men (Cohen 2013; Gentry and Sjöberg 2015; Thomas and Bond 2015). Others have showed that women play instrumental strategic noncombat roles in conflict that serve to shape trajectories of violence (Coulter 2008; Loken 2017; Parkinson 2013).

Accompanying the increasing nuance in the literature on gender, conflict, and violence, Melanie Hughes (2009) broke new ground by

systematically examining the role of women in postviolence politics. Incorporating war into existing analyses of women's political representation, Hughes showed that certain types of armed conflict were associated with increased numbers of women in parliament. Hughes and Tripp (2015), in a similar study in sub-Saharan Africa, found that countries that had experienced civil wars were more likely to have higher levels of women in the legislature. While the literature on female combatants sought to challenge and undermine static depictions of gender binaries in conflict, this latter work highlighted the openings and political opportunity structures that allowed women to enter new political spaces. Precisely because it is so destructive, war toppled existing sociopolitical hierarchies, thus creating opportunities for new norms, structures, and relationships to emerge.

The books from Freedman, Mageza-Barthel, and Tripp extend this line of scholarship by showing how violence can shape gender norms in surprising and productive ways. Mageza-Barthel, focusing on Rwanda, demonstrates how new gender norms promoted by the international community were cultivated in the period of immense political transition and upheaval that followed the 1994 genocide and the subsequent reconstruction of Rwandan political life. Freedman notes that, partly due to the scale of violence against women in DR Congo, Rwanda, and the former Yugoslavia, and the international attention that followed, gendered violence in conflict can no longer be considered an invisible or neglected issue. Indeed, the response from donors, advocates, and policy makers in DR Congo — in the form of aid, assistance, and support to victims of sexual and gender-based violence — has been so robust that it has led some to speculate that we are now focusing *too* heavily on sexual violence (Autesserre 2012; Baaz and Stern 2008). Tripp notes that international attention to gender issues in the 1990s onward, combined with the rebuilding of political infrastructure from scratch in many postconflict countries, gave rise to constitutional and legislative guarantees of gender equality and new spaces for participation in public life that would not otherwise be available to women.

Tripp's *Women and Power in Post-Conflict Africa* provides an impressively detailed analysis of these dynamics in Angola, Liberia, and Uganda. By asking why rapid transformations in women's representation and gender-centric legislation do not follow all conflicts, Tripp isolates a number of conditions that produce the elevation of women's rights and representation. Using the cases of failed gender mobilization in Angola and Mozambique, she shows that international advocacy around women's

rights and the promotion of equitable gender relations by donors and nongovernment organizations (NGOs) is unlikely to succeed if it is not preceded by mobilization by domestic women's movements. Tripp further observes that the relationship between women's rights and conflict was most pronounced at a particular moment in global history: the 1990s. This is when changes in international gender norms coincided most forcefully with women's domestic mobilization and a number of conflicts across sub-Saharan Africa. Finally, Tripp demonstrates that civil wars are more likely than international conflicts to provoke change because of the holistic renegotiation of internal governance required in the aftermath of domestic conflict; that conflicts ending in negotiated settlements are most likely to provide for comprehensive changes to the gender system because they offer a platform of broader political inclusion than do decisive victories by one side or another; and that gendered change is most likely to emerge from protracted conflicts because the deep ruptures caused by intense violence create the openings and possibilities for change.

Mageza-Barthel's *Mobilizing Transnational Gender Politics in Post-Genocide Rwanda* adopts a similar approach, focusing on mobilization surrounding transnational gender politics in postgenocide Rwanda. She makes a complementary argument: that conflict and upheaval created new opportunities for gender empowerment and representation. Mageza-Barthel focuses predominantly, however, on the utility and usability of three international frameworks for Rwandan women: the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, and UN Resolution 1325. Mageza-Barthel persuasively argues that these frameworks served as tools for Rwandan women to engage the state and make their voices heard in the particular postwar moment. Moreover, she shows how domestic gender politics and conversations among Rwandan women were concurrently shaped by these international discourses. Mageza-Barthel also highlights the important role played by individual women who championed the UN gender empowerment agenda, navigated between international and domestic institutions, and played a key role in "vernacularizing" or "domesticating" international concepts. The book also notes the limitations of the UN's gender norms and shows how the local political context and state-society relations also shaped the ease with which such norms were implemented domestically. In Rwanda, the "political will" of the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front regime, for instance, created a critical space in which the women's rights agenda could be carried out — but also limited the extent to which these frameworks could transform women's position in society.

One of the most powerful and compelling contributions of these two texts is their focus on the role of local female agency. Tripp, in particular, offers a powerful critique of the heavy emphasis in much social science literature on international advocacy and north-south diffusion. Rather than emphasizing international legal frameworks, Tripp argues that it is *local* women's movements in conflict-affected countries that have been best placed to take advantage of the political openings created by the disruptions of war in order to advance gender-progressive platforms. In this sense, peace processes have become sites of contestation in which political settlements, new constitutions, and electoral reform efforts allow for the formal and informal redefining of gender roles and relations by domestic women activists. Support from international donors and advocates is important, but without the grassroots women's movements that spearhead these efforts domestically, Tripp argues that gender advocacy is unlikely to result in meaningful, substantive, or lasting gains for women.

Freedman's *Gender, Violence and Politics in the Democratic Republic of Congo* differs slightly in its focus. Like Tripp and Mageza-Barthel, Freedman emphasizes that social transformations brought about by war impact gendered power relations in ways that can benefit women directly. Focusing on the case of the DR Congo, Freedman writes:

As well as suffering the consequences of war, women can also be said to benefit in some ways, as the changing of gender roles that ensue allows them to occupy roles that are not traditionally open to them, and may afford them more control of economic resources. The new roles that they occupy may lead to changes in their skills and status which could be maintained in a longer term after the conflict has ended (2015, 42).

This point, which is central to Tripp and Mageza-Barthel's contributions, is subsidiary to Freedman's much broader argument. While Freedman acknowledges that women can benefit in the aftermath of conflict in unexpected ways, her primary focus is on emphasizing the perils and inaccuracies of depicting women as "passive victims" of war. Thus, both during and after conflict, she shows that women participate as meaningful strategic actors as combatants, activists, and leaders. Women are as capable of contributing to atrocities, violence, and insecurity as men and should not be assumed to be more inclined toward peace because of their gender or their roles as mothers, wives, and daughters.

Freedman also calls attention to the unintended negative consequences that emerge from a singular focus on male against female sexual violence in DR Congo's wars. She highlights the deeply problematic nature of

reporting stereotypical colonial images of savage acts of sexual torture committed by barbaric and violent men. These images are reproduced not only by journalists, but also in academic and NGO reports. These depictions, she observes, dehistoricize violence and remove it from the broader sociopolitical context out of which it was born. They also render male victims of violence — sexual or otherwise — invisible, as well as obscure women's agency as perpetrators and resisters. She notes that the search for "quick solutions" to the crisis of rape in DR Congo has led not to answers, but to the erasing of complexities and a failure to tackle more deep-rooted social problems (59).

Like Tripp and Mageza-Barthel, Freedman highlights limited opportunities for gendered change that have emerged from the disruptions to traditional gender roles and structures created by war. However, she also recognizes that women in DR Congo have failed to benefit from political inclusion following conflict to the same extent as their counterparts elsewhere. Sustained and meaningful gains for women in DR Congo have ultimately been obstructed by the unrelenting endurance of armed conflict. Unlike Liberia, Rwanda, and Uganda, armed conflict and civil unrest continues to devastate land and livelihoods in DR Congo's eastern provinces (Hoffmann and Vlassenroot 2014). Ongoing conflicts do not allow actors the political space to mobilize to change the status quo because leaders and militias are too focused on the conflict to support gender reform (Tripp 2015, 19). Freedman also calls attention to deeply entrenched sociocultural norms that continue to exclude women from public life. However, when contrasted with other countries, the most compelling explanation derives from the fact that while countless efforts are devoted to gender-based reform by donors and NGOs in DR Congo, ending violence and establishing free and fair elections remains the overarching priority of the international community. Thus, at crucial moments, development practitioners and government actors have deprioritized gender parity in favor of conflict termination and peace building (Freedman 2015, 115).

POSTCONFLICT POWER

While each of the three books breaks new ground in advancing our knowledge and understanding of gender and conflict, two areas remain ripe for further exploration. The first pertains to a gap between symbolic (and sometimes substantive) advancements in women's rights in certain

spheres and the structural and socioeconomic constraints that impede their implementation or equitable distribution. Put differently, this can be understood as a dichotomy between legislative and representative gains for women (policy) and the broader realization of women's rights and gender emancipation (practice).

The second crucial consideration is not systemic, but rather pertains to the strategic and deliberate instrumentalization of gender parity for political — and sometimes conflict-related — ends. The political cooptation of empowerment and emancipation is worthy of careful scrutiny in any context in which rights and freedoms are granted selectively against a backdrop of otherwise oppressive or authoritarian practices.

Who Gains? Policy, Parity and Practice

Freedman perhaps comes the closest of the three authors to exploring the disjuncture between gender-based inclusion and the genuine elevation and emancipation of women of all ethnic, class, regional, and educational backgrounds. This disjuncture is a crucial area for further scrutiny. Tripp and Mageza-Barthel convincingly highlight the important legislative shifts that have occurred across multiple postconflict African countries, as well as the significance of increasing numbers of women in leadership positions. Yet both stop short of examining what these changes mean for the actual representation of women's interests, as well as which women serve to gain the most from gender-based reforms.

Feminist scholarship has critically explored the limitations of women's empowerment schemes, arguing that international norms and frameworks promoting women's inclusion neglect to fundamentally transform the gendered power relations and institutions that produce women's marginalization in the first place. Further, such frameworks often overlook how rights or inclusion efforts can differentially empower women within inequalities social orders, as women from certain ethnic, class, religious, linguistic, political, or educational backgrounds may stand to benefit more fully from their inclusion or rights (Brown 2000). Such unequal impacts of rights-based empowerment efforts can create new forms of social inequality, widening the gap between policy and practice and even further deepening some women's oppression (see Baynes 2000). Many of the women's empowerment efforts discussed in these books thus present a Masters-Tools problem, to build on Audre

Lorde's famous dictum, in that the same political systems that produce women's oppression can never be satisfactorily reformed or leveraged to eradicate it.

Indeed, examples from the authors' own cases illustrate these points. In Rwanda, for example, despite having the world's highest level of women in parliament, a gender-sensitive domestic legal framework that draws heavily from the UN's Women, Peace, and Security framework and a host of institutions designed to protect and promote women, the vast majority of Rwandan women remain extremely poor, disproportionately illiterate, and unable to take advantage of the rights they have on paper (see Berry 2015b; Debusscher and Ansoms 2013). Moreover, the promotion of women has served to obscure the overwhelming dominance of Anglophone Tutsi in government, allowing for the consolidation of power in the hands of a minority within a minority and thereby increasing the gulf between women from different ethnic, linguistic, and class backgrounds. The extension of some rights to women may also have inadvertently created new forms of oppression. For example, after the 1999 Organic Land Law granted Rwandan women the ability to inherit land, the average size of land plots has plummeted in the densely populated country, leading to intrafamily violence, insecurity, and even declining prospects of marriage for poor rural Rwandans (see Berry n.d.). Such dynamics highlight the need to remain attentive to the ways in which differently situated women might gain from apparent emancipation (Hughes 2011).

Other cases produce similarly mixed results. Though gender advances in DR Congo have been made in certain spheres, questions of who stands to gain from gender-based reform remain open. Disparities between winners and losers do not break down upon ethnic lines, but it is nevertheless the case that increased gender parity disproportionately benefits wealthier urban women while failing to provide the same opportunities to the majority of poorer rural women. Moreover, certain issues — such as gender violence in conflict — have received a great deal of attention while others — such as the elevation of women in household decision-making — have been neglected.

Domestic and international attention to gender violence in conflict has led to widespread societal intolerance and condemnation of certain forms of gendered harms in DR Congo, as well as to a host of programs to rehabilitate, support, and empower women, and the prioritization of legal accountability for sexual crimes (Lake 2014; Lake, Muthaka, and Walker 2016). These gains would have been less likely in an

environment where conflict had not so deeply ruptured the preexisting fabric of society (Lake [n.d.](#)). Yet, while programs to support women's empowerment theoretically create possibilities for new agency and opportunity, in practice, vulnerable women frequently fail to reap the benefits of rights won in court (Lake, Muthaka, and Walker [2016](#)). Even wealthy women often achieve only limited benefits. Thus, as Freedman points out, vast socioeconomic disparities and heavily male-dominated structures of power persist beneath the guise of women's emancipation. While women may have gained symbolically from postconflict gender advocacy in certain spheres, the vast majority prove no better off in practice than they were prior to the introduction of supposedly emancipatory gender reforms.

These dynamics are familiar in other forms of rights claiming. In the context of the U.S. civil rights movement, Risa Goluboff ([2007](#)) showed that demands for workplace discrimination laws to protect African American workers came at the expense of broader redistributive social and economic policies that might have done more for racial equality in the long term. These arguments illustrate the idea that gains in one arena do not necessarily spill over to others. Instead, acquiescing to narrow forms of rights claiming can serve as a political lion's skin, to use Marx's phrasing, serving to conceal and entrench deep-seated and persistent social disparities and fissures beneath the guise of sociolegal progress (McCann [2006](#)). Indeed, in Rwanda, DR Congo, and elsewhere, it is clear that legislative reforms that incorporate women have served to relieve pressure to implement more transformative or substantively meaningful forms of gender emancipation. Thus, while specific gendered practices and behaviors may have changed, patriarchal hierarchies of power continue to pervade public and private realms and structure gendered power relations (Goetz and Hassim [2003](#)).

Selective Emancipation: The Politicization of Parity

In addition to questions concerning who stands to gain from increased political representation and which limited forms of gendered emancipation are granted to which populations, the books also raise questions about some of the alternate political considerations that shape the processes of integrating international gender norms into domestic legal frameworks. While not a focus of Mageza-Barthel's discussion, other Rwanda scholars (Longman [2006](#); Reyntjens [2011](#)) have shown

how international norms surrounding women's equality were not just promoted by women activists, but also by the postwar regime with a more politically expedient motive: to obscure the overwhelming dominance of Ugandan-born Tutsi members of the Rwandan Patriotic Front in Parliament and the limited power of any government branch beyond the executive. Promoting women became a fruitful political strategy; Kagame's regime garnered good press all over the world while more deeply entrenching its own political control. Moreover, by filling cabinet positions and seats in Parliament with women, Kagame's regime effectively gutted civil society, depriving it of the women who had done the most to spearhead the grassroots movement for women's progress and co-opting potential sources of political competition (see Berry n.d.). Tripp notes how a similar process unfolded in Liberia, as women who were most involved in the peace movement took better paid positions in government or with international nongovernmental organizations in the aftermath (243). Thus inclusion can have the effect of neutralizing civil society, limiting possibilities for democratic participation, and curtailing the ability of civil society to serve as a counterweight against authoritarian tendencies espoused by the ruling regime. Scholars must remain attentive to the fact that the political incentive structures that shape rights gains in one area may ultimately serve to undermine rights in other areas, thus weakening the transformative potential of those gains over the long term and permitting other forms of oppression to go unchecked.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In provoking questions pertaining to the strategic cooptation and limited implementation of gender egalitarian policies, each of the texts challenges strict binaries of "war" and "peace," and "violence" and "nonviolence." For women, especially, the books make clear that violence takes many forms beyond those on the battlefield. Women in each of the cases discussed face insecurity in their homes and communities long after peace accords have been signed or shooting has stopped. In DR Congo, Freedman shows how war is not the only source of violence against women; instead, colonial legacies, cultural assumptions, and domestic and international policies are equally — if not more — to blame for gendered insecurities. Fully unpacking how war impacts women will require future researchers to move away from clear dichotomies and normative

or linear assumptions about violence/nonviolence, war/peace, victim/perpetrator and instead emphasize that women's lived experiences of conflicts and their aftermath are complex, multifaceted, and dynamic. Given this, seemingly abject or senseless acts of violence can entail unanticipated positive and negative repercussions simultaneously. Similarly, the inertia or stagnation of peace can permit alternative forms of gendered and nongendered violence and oppression.

A final question left open by this research is the extent to which war not only disrupts gender relations, but whether it might also open opportunities for collective action or institutional growth around other marginalized issues or constituencies. Tripp mentions a parallel with disability advocates, who have similarly used periods of institutional rebuilding after war to advocate for better policies and protections. Might war also open the possibility for other marginalized groups — such as indigenous, ethnic, and racial minorities, or LGBTQIA activists — to mobilize for greater rights and inclusion? Similarly, might state fragility brought about by war in other contexts catalyze new forms of institutional growth? The extent to which openings created by conflict, fragility, and upheaval can be utilized to promote and advance new political agendas and the representation of new constituencies depends largely on agenda setting and collective mobilization by coalitions of domestic and international stakeholders. And these books teach us that without deliberate and focused mobilization, and fairly broad-based domestic support, previously marginalized constituencies seem unlikely to benefit from the ruptures of war. Questions concerning which groups are better poised to take advantage of such opportunities and which issues become focal points for collective action in the aftermath of conflict (Carpenter 2007) are fruitful topics for further investigation.

By raising such fertile questions, these books each make vital and long-awaited contributions to a burgeoning new field of inquiry. While the texts inevitably provoke as many questions as they are able to answer, they cover crucial — and previously undertheorized — ground. They also amplify the voices of women pursuing peace and power in conflict-affected states, collectively reminding us of the vital role played by capable, active, and impressive women leading reforms across the globe. As Tripp notes, “the argument that there is a dearth of women leaders never was a credible argument and needs to be retired once and for all” (2015, xxvi). As the nature of global conflict shifts away from interstate or even civil wars towards more diffused, localized violence characterized by state and nonstate armed actors, women affected by violence will continue to play an essential role in rebuilding society in its aftermath. How will shifts in

the nature of violence affect gendered power relations? While this is up to future researchers to investigate, these three books remind us to look for opportunity and openings in destruction, and how these openings might be harnessed to catalyze meaningful social change.

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Feminist and Human Rights Struggles in Peru: Decolonizing Transitional Justice. By Pascha Bueno-Hansen. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 240 pp. \$28.00.

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Pascha Bueno-Hansen's book tackles a crucial and sensitive issue in Peru and beyond: the limits of international human rights law in addressing